

Looking for clues for past life on Mars

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On August 6, 2012, the NASA Curiosity rover landed on Mars at the base of Mount Sharp, a mountain the size of Kilimanjaro (roughly 19,000 feet) in the middle of Gale Crater. Nina Lanza, space scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, remembers the day well. As part of the team that built ChemCam, one of the ten instruments on the rover, she spent three months at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, living on “Mars time” to follow Curiosity’s first “steps.”

ChemCam stands for “chemistry camera” and comprises a laser-induced breakdown spectroscopy (LIBS) instrument and a Remote Micro Imager (RMI). It was built at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in collaboration with the French space agency CNES. Nina Lanza and postdoctoral fellow Patrick Gasda are two of the Los Alamos scientists who work on the instrument.

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